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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF

THE COLLEGE OF IMAGING ARTS AND SCIENCES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MOVING TOWARDS RECONCILIATION

BY

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DATE: NOVEMBER, 1995

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DEDICATION

To Nancy Blackwell

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family for their love and support and my thesis committee members, Max Lenderman, Tom Lightfoot, and Luvon Sheppard, for their insights, observations, guidance and patience.

Special thanks to Iris Castillo for being a friend to a person who sometimes seemed like she was losing her mind.

...La Vieja

I. INTRODUCTION

My thesis concept had originally been concerned with gender role playing and the effect this role playing has on the individual. As the work progressed, however, my original concept slowly evolved into something more personal. "Moving Towards Reconciliation" was really about resolving my own questions, and being reconciled with the answers I found. This thesis report describes the route which took me from abstract concept to a personal reconciliation.

II. ORIGINAL INTENT

Moving Towards Reconciliation

The goal of my thesis work will be to: comment on the fundamental differences between man and woman; explore the resulting conflicts which arise out of these differences; and consider forms of reconciliation. Although textile media and technique will be the dominant vehicle of expression, I will also incorporate other materials and methods, including elements of metal, into my thesis body of work.

***Paula M. Boronell
October, 1994***

When I read my original thesis statement it seems grandiose, yet dispassionate. I had originally intended to address issues regarding the relationship between the sexes. I chose this topic because I was surprised at the stereotypical roles men and women were expected to play here in Rochester and specifically at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Although Rochester is indeed a sizable and sophisticated metropolis, it appears that there is a considerable preoccupation with men and women acting out "traditional" gender roles. I wanted to explore related issues with my work.

I envisioned three pieces. The first piece would depict the essence of man and woman. I wanted to somehow capture both our essential similarity, as well as our essential differences. The second would represent the conflict which arises out of our differences. The final piece was to represent the reconciliation which our similarities can move us towards.

Very early on I felt the quilt could effectively communicate conflict as well as the human need to restore harmony and order in the face of discord. I see the quilt as a collection of disparate colors and patterns which are joined together to form a cohesive whole. They are planned, yet there is an improvisational and therefore unpredictable quality about them. Additionally, because my maternal grandmother

made quilts, I felt personally connected to this form of expression. I therefore resolved to use the quilt as a vehicle to express conflict for the second piece in my thesis body of work.

Background

Until I began spending summer vacations with my grandmother, quilts were our winter "blankets". I knew my grandmother made our "blankets" and somehow fabric my mother used to make our dresses would often wind up on these "blankets". They were, however, still just "blankets". Once I began spending summer vacations with my grandmother, I realized that these "blankets" were quilts and these quilts were very special.

One day, during one of these vacations, my grandmother showed me her collection of scraps which consisted of bags and bags of pieces of fabric. She explained to me that these scraps were left-over fabric which my mother and aunts sent to her after making homemade clothing. (. . . so that's how pieces of my dress wound up in those quilts. . .) From there my grandmother went on to describe how she sorted her scrapes, cut her quilt shapes, pieced them together, finished the face of the quilt, stuffed and joined the backing and finally finished the quilt. During this explanation, I had many anxious questions. . . How long does it take to sort your scraps? What if you run out of your favorite fabric? How come you only cut quilt shapes in the spring? Why do you only finish the quilt in the parlor? Although my grandmother answered my questions with calm assurance, I was still overwhelmed by how complicated it was to make a quilt . . . and I was terrified she would ask me to help her . . . after all it was summer and scrap sorting time.

Although the quilt is something I know, love and feel comfortable with, I cannot forget the anxiety I felt when my grandmother explained the quilting process to me. I think of starting out with all those bags of scraps. I think of being presented with chaos and choosing to wrestle with it in order to create harmony. To me the beauty of a quilt is secondary to the chaos from which it arises.

Coming up with imagery for the first and third works was extremely difficult. In retrospect, I realized that I wasn't as clear on the message they were to convey, as I was on the message of the quilt. All images that came to mind regarding the first and final works seemed forced, almost constrained as compared to the quilt which felt so workable.

III. EXPLORATION OF INTENT

The time and experience between original intent and completed body of work was the most significant aspect of this thesis project. Indeed the title of my thesis, "Moving Toward Reconciliation" accurately describes the creative process of moving from head, to hand, to letting go of the finished work and allowing it to stand on its own. Initially, I focused on the piece dealing with the essence of man and woman. I felt confident that the quilt would evolve and believed that the final piece, "Moving Toward Reconciliation" would materialize once the other works were in progress.

I began with a jumble of thoughts, feelings, and fear. I would jot entries in my diary and do random sketches, hesitating to commit. Finally, I decided on a pair of life-size sculptural reliefs made of cast felt for the first piece. I then proceeded, rather mechanically, to create these objects. I dyed, carded and felted the wool, made plaster molds, cast the felt, and constructed the figures. Conversations with my thesis committee members was usually focused on technical issues. . . how to mount the work, stabilizing the work once mounted, etc.

The actual sculpture, however, was not developing as originally envisioned. It felt massive, strong, overpowering and a bit mysterious. In executing the work, I had allowed for no deviation from the original plan. A distance began to develop between me and my work. As disappointment mounted, it began to feel like I was merely creating this work as a degree requirement. At the time, however, I didn't know where to go except on to the next piece.

With the quilt, the second piece in my proposed thesis body of work, I followed the process of: thoughts, to sketch, to work. Because, however, the quilt

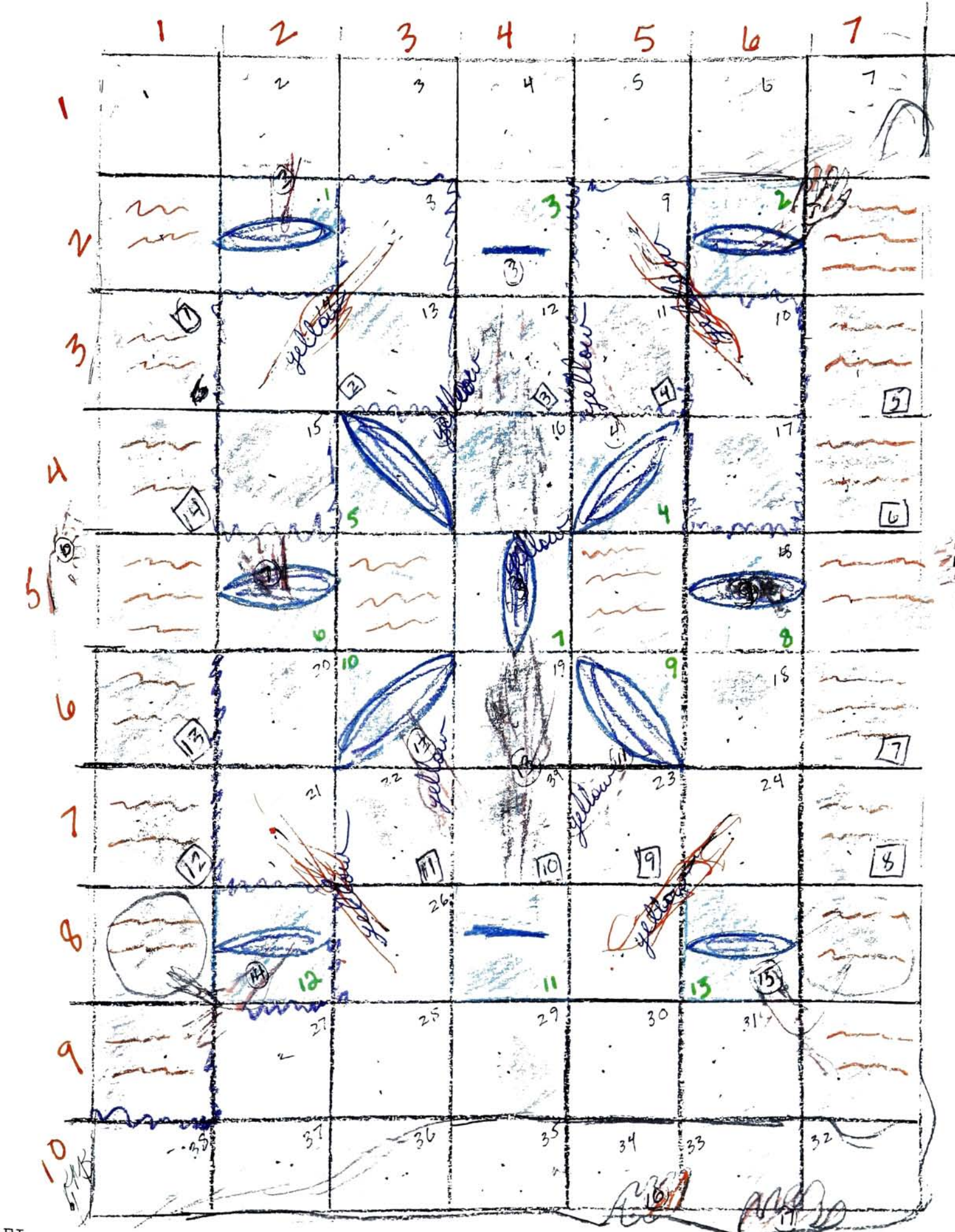
was a format I was familiar with and had warm feelings about the work was less mechanical. The quilt would measure approximately 7' x 9' and would again be made of felt with cast felt hands as an added element. Once the preliminary sketch had been drawn [See Illustration 1] the work of dyeing, carding and felting the wool, making molds and casting the felt proceeded. As stated before this work flowed more easily but, there was still far too much distance between myself and the work.

At this point an idea for the final piece had not materialized. My mind was literally blank. Despite the fact that it was becoming increasingly clear that the first piece was not going to work, I could not make that pronouncement. I was stuck. At this point a formal committee meeting was arranged.

The committee meeting was difficult for me because I felt my work, and thus myself, were under attack. The questions put to me by the committee members were difficult to answer not only because I had chosen to communicate a personal point of view, but also had approached the work in a very mechanical and methodical manner. This meeting and the questions raised were, however, essential because it enabled me to move forward with the work. Although there were only six weeks remaining before the show, I had been given valuable insights into translating thoughts and ideas into reality.

Among the points brought out during this meeting were:

- i. I was working with felt. The techniques used caused the felt to change texture and surface. These varying textures conveyed different sensations, and projected color differently;
- ii. When there is a strong connection between material, technique and intent of the work, the work communicates with clarity and directness;



FIGURE

- iii. The size of a work in and of itself conveys meaning, carries weight, impacts significantly on color and design choices. The size of the quilt made a strong statement, the additional element of cast hands, embroidery, and the actual joining of the quilt squares would have to be thought out carefully in order not to make the quilt an overwhelming and indecipherable mass of fiber and color;
- iv. Over thinking work kills spontaneity, and thus the vibrancy of work. It becomes just another object.

The list above enumerates some pretty basic concepts, but at the time, they seemed like revelations to me because they had been presented to me in a "real life" situation. They became guides in working to the completion of my thesis work.

IV. REEVALUATION OF INTENT

In considering the comments made by my thesis committee, I realized how far removed I had become from my chosen medium of expression . . . fiber. In realizing this, I spent a few days reviewing work done the previous year, and re-reading diary entries. During this period I began to re-articulate how I felt about fiber and why felt had become the primary vehicle of expression for my thesis work.

Any definition of fiber has to include its sensual quality. It touches us intimately everyday. It caresses us, envelops us, shields and protects us. The real goal of my work was to express the power of fiber.

Felt is basic fiber. The process of felting is so old and was done in so many regions of the world that it is hard to pin down its time and place of origin. Felt has a dense hard appearance but is, in reality, soft and malleable. Felting is a mass of wool fleece matted together with the assistance of moisture. The structure of wool permits this matting or bonding to occur. The process is straight forward, and simple.

I began felting during the Spring 1993 quarter. I started with a series of small felts, initially concerned with color combinations. The next phase of experimentation involved varying the density of the felt. The felts produced during this phase went from thin and almost cloud-like to, a very stiff and thick denseness. Next came experiments which dealt with including materials, other than wool in the felt bats. Mohair, feathers, raffia, sisal, paper, and acetate transparencies were some of the materials added to this group of felts.

During the early part of the Fall 1994 quarter, I wanted to experiment with shaping and forming felt. This, of course, led to another round of experimentation. These experiments started with molding the felt around mannequins

and ended with making plaster molds in which felt bats would be cast. Polyurethane was used to stiffen the felt and allow the felt to hold its cast form. The introduction of Polyurethane led to testing different types of urethanes (water-based, oil based) and observing the different textures achieved by various coats and methods of application.

By the end of this experimentation process, I was able to achieve a wide range of effects with felt. Felt could range from soft and pliable to dense and extremely rigid. [See Illustration 2] Felt's appeal became its flexibility as a medium. Felt then became a perfect vehicle to express my concept of fiber. It is soft and sensual, as well as strong. The process is very direct and spontaneous.

New Directions

This review of my work along with comments made during the thesis committee group critique allowed for a clarification of goals. This clarification of goals further enabled me to make informed decisions about how to proceed. First, I decided that the two remaining pieces would be grey. The color and complexity of the quilt was communicating conflict effectively, however, it was becoming overwhelming to work with. I wanted the companion pieces to be subdued and soothing not only for myself but also for the viewer. I had begun to feel that these works should be connected and compliment each other. The two remaining pieces were in reality, responses to the quilt and its qualities.

The content of my message had changed from raising questions about gender roles to the very issue of reconciling the contradictory forces we encounter within ourselves as well as the world we live in. On a personal level this meant beginning to reconcile my decision to pursue an MFA at age 39. . . accepting the

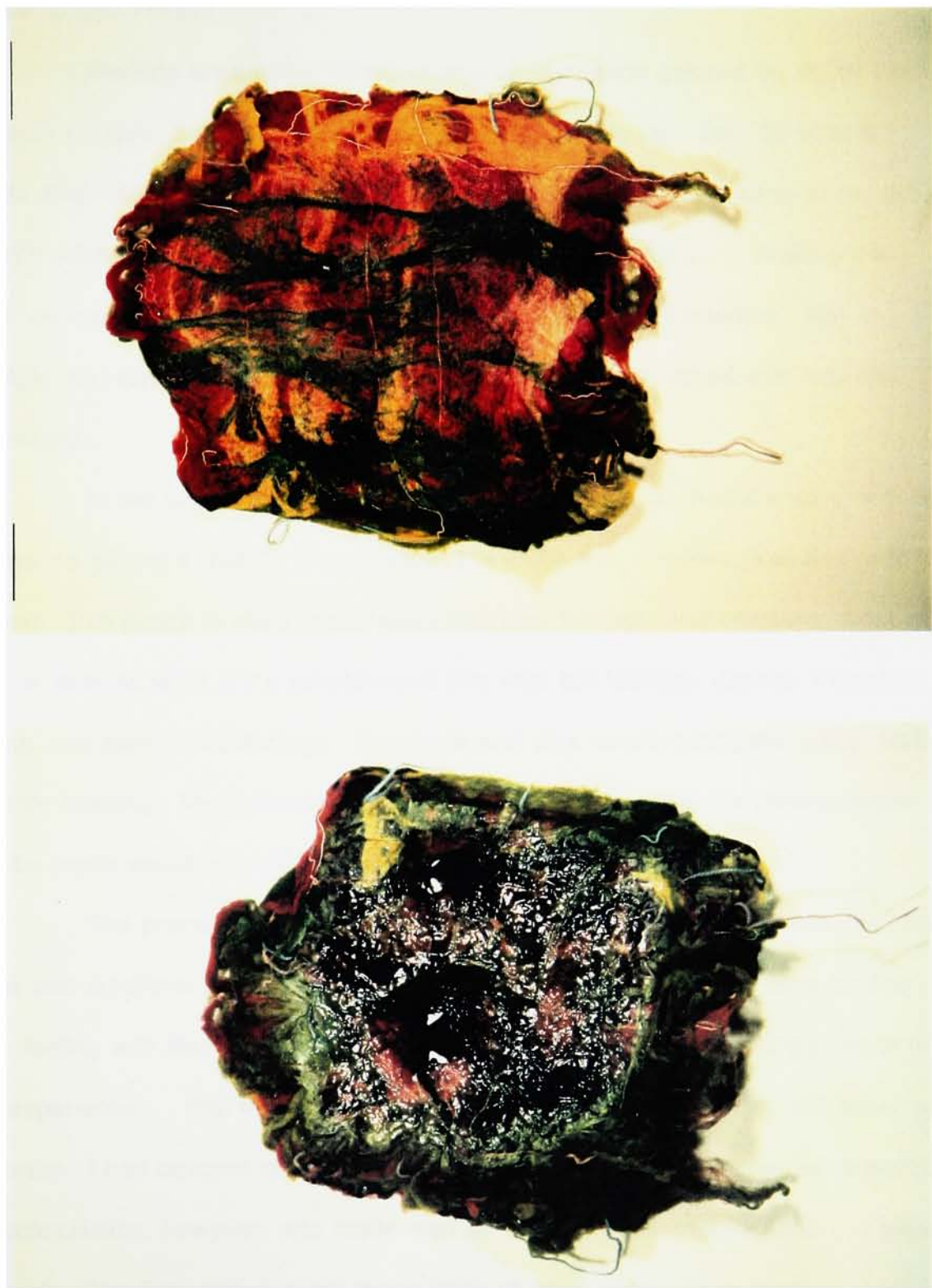


FIGURE 2

practical consequences of this decision and believing that the personal fulfillment would be its own reward.

Working toward this very personal reconciliation colored my entire thesis experience because it represented an ongoing theme in my life: Do I do what is practical, and "correct" or do I do what I know is best for me, what I know in my gut is my path? After many years of doing what was the practical thing . . . making the "logical" choices, this thesis experience felt like my first taste of freedom. Not surprisingly my response to this freedom was excitement often mixed with fear and apprehension.

In the beginning of this thesis experience I approached my work, with an emphasis on getting it "right". The failure of the first piece, I believe, was due to this approach. This desire to get it "right" discounted my feelings, and intuitions about my work and, after all what is the substance of this work but feelings, desires, thoughts, intuitions, and mental wanderings. This issue was also raised during the group thesis committee meeting. My committee members helped me see that the choices which had to be made would have to come from a very personal place within me.

The process of moving from trying to get it "right", to going with the flow of ideas and emotions was difficult. I was afraid because I was giving up a familiar way of dealing with life. Acknowledging this transition became the turning point of my thesis experience. . . this was not merely a degree requirement, but my first statement as an artist. I had become reconciled to my decision to pursue a career as an artist. That reconciliation, however, was made step by hesitant, meandering step . . . slow, and steady. The final pieces in my thesis body of work represent my first reconciliation to my life's choice. The process which moved those pieces toward

completion represent the struggle to trust my choices and my judgement as a person and as an artist.

Moving Towards Reconciliation

Fiber is basic to us. It is an intimate part of our lives. We wear it and we sleep with it. It touches our skin. The presence of it's touch is reassuring. The absence of it fosters vulnerability. We enter the world disoriented, flailing about and crying, and we are swaddled by fiber. It touches us and we are soothed and comforted. We are lulled into a sense of security. It is from this point that we begin our life's journey . . . asking our questions . . . solving our mysteries . . . emerging as individuals.

***Paula M. Boronell
April, 1995***

The Work

My thesis body of work is the result of reevaluating and re-defining my original intent. One of my original concerns with having a very defined and delineated plan for the quilt was de-emphasized and, pretty much abandoned for the two remaining pieces because I felt it would create a distance between myself and my work. I executed the remaining two pieces guided by very informal visual images and trusted that material, process, concept and my physical labor would achieve the fitting end result.

The final body of work consisted of three pieces which included the original quilt, "Out of the Blue" and two companion pieces, "Us" and "Moving Towards Reconciliation." "Us" alludes to our being made of the same stuff. Despite our fundamental sameness, we have become hardened into individual states of isolation. This anomic state prevents us from anticipating the predictable collisions which oftentimes results in conflict. The quilt, "Out of the Blue" represents this resulting conflict. The title does indeed refer to the feeling that conflicts just "pop up", out of the blue, without rhyme or reason. Finally, "Moving Towards Reconciliation" presents one

of the possibilities conflict affords us. Once we are out of our shell, once we have resolved conflict, do we retreat back into that empty place or do we try to connect with each other, the world, and ourselves as whole human beings.

Us

The first work, entitled *Us* [See *Illustration 3 and 4*] evolved from wanting to get away from the heaviness, complexity, and denseness of the quilt. The key message this piece was to communicate was fragility. Despite its rich surface, calmness is projected. The overall felt is grey and is strewn with yellow, gold, and orange raffia. The grey is to sooth. The orange raffia, which is incorporated in all three works, represents the spark of life, that force and energy we feel when we hold a newborn. The child trembles, almost vibrates with energy and life. Though diffused, this spark and its potential intensity remains within us as we grow. Like the raffia it crackles, snaps and bristles.

This work touches the floor, approaches us. Its ragged edges, and holes further emphasizes its frailty, and almost asks the viewer to reach out and "fix" it. It's size 8' x 8' is overwhelming but not overpowering. As the figures slowly emerge from the surface of the felt, there is a slight surprise. Of the same cloth, they were always there . . . quiet . . . frail . . . vulnerable.

These figures are in the center of the piece, floating, suspended, trapped, encased in a diaphanous cloud of fiber. Their hands almost touch, yet their heads tilt away from each other. They hang static and limp while that spark of life, the raffia, swirls around them and through them. They are really fragmentary figures. Their wholeness or completeness is an assumption, not the reality. They are US.



FIGURE 3

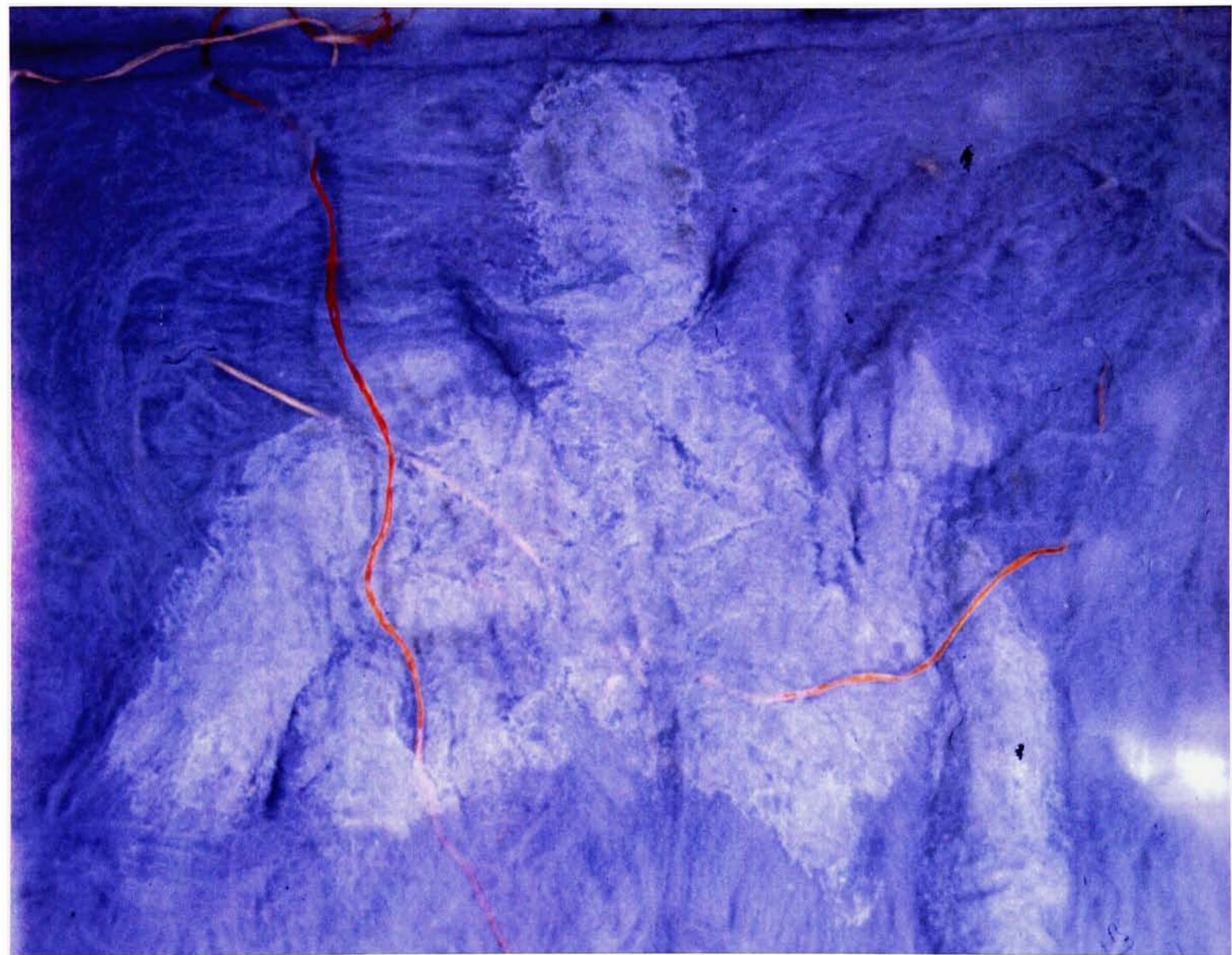


FIGURE 4

We become hardened in this individual isolation, this anomie. We are disconnected not only from each other, but from ourselves as complete human beings. We are alone in our sadness, and pain as well as our joy and ecstasy. All too often making contact with each other erupts into conflict, if for no other reason than that we are required to come out of our protective isolation chamber and into the real world.

Out of the Blue

From the onset, the intent of the quilt was to be big and overpowering. [See Illustration 5 and 6] It is 7½' x 9½'. Conflict is often emotionally overpowering, confusing, and has a violent undertone. The predominant blue of the quilt alludes to the unexpected conflicts we face regularly which seem to spring from "out of the blue". They are big and small, but that they exist is part of the human condition and the adventure of life.

The cast hands protruding from slit squares are intended to suggest violence and aggression. The orange raffia, and sisal which spills from the top and bottom edges as well as the center of the work suggests not only the force of life, but also the "something more to it" which often underlies conflicts . . . the hidden parts . . . the words unspoken . . . the restraint we try to maintain. The embroidered text is of passages from Genesis which speaks of that age old conflict between men and women.

The configuration of squares, cast hands and text panels simulates the pattern of a traditional quilt. The cast hands, which are yellow and brown, contrast with the cool blue of the background squares. The size of the quilt along with the blue causes the viewer to move away from the work. The cast forms and text panels, (which are barely decipherable) pull the viewer closer. These opposing sensations

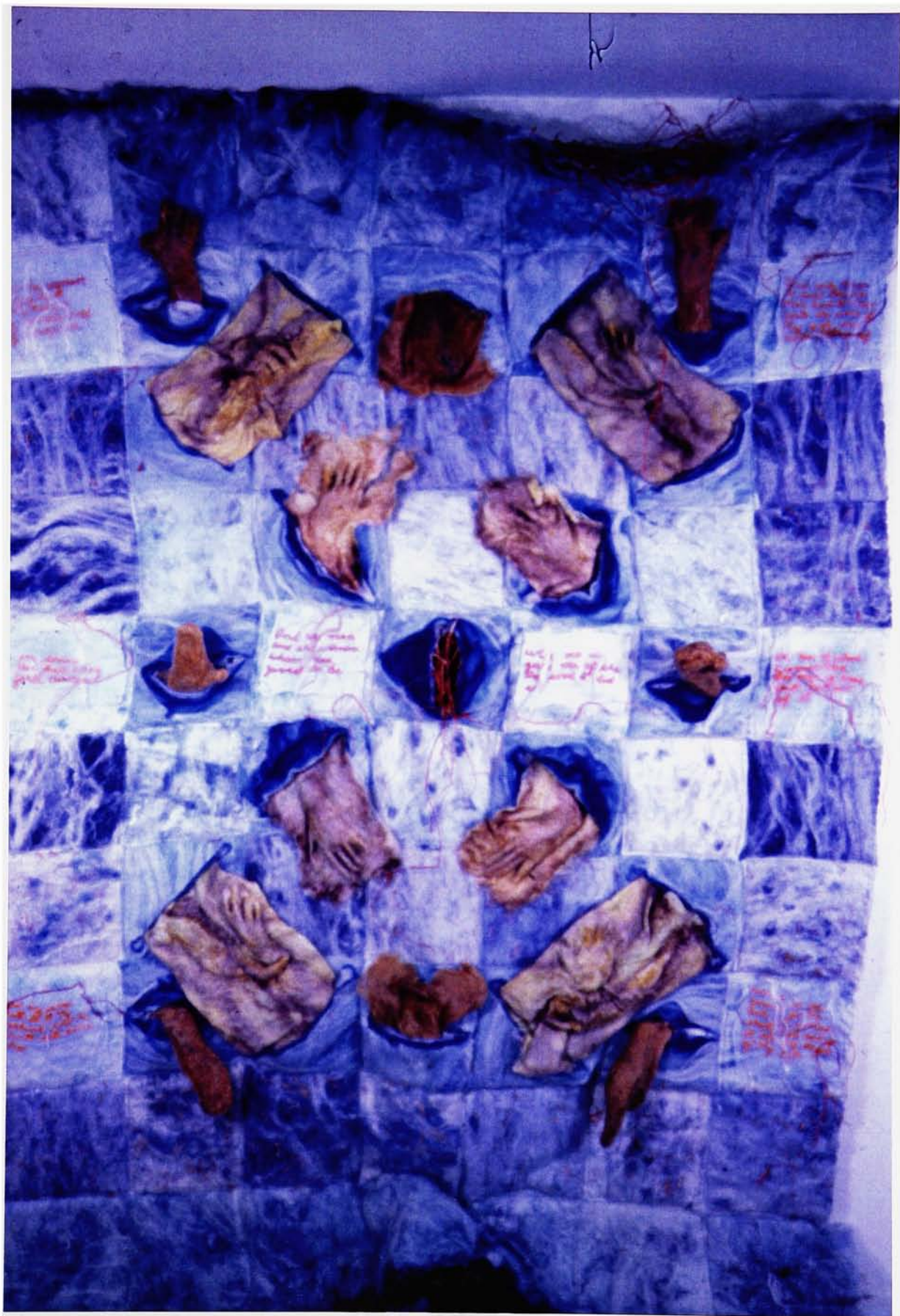


FIGURE 5

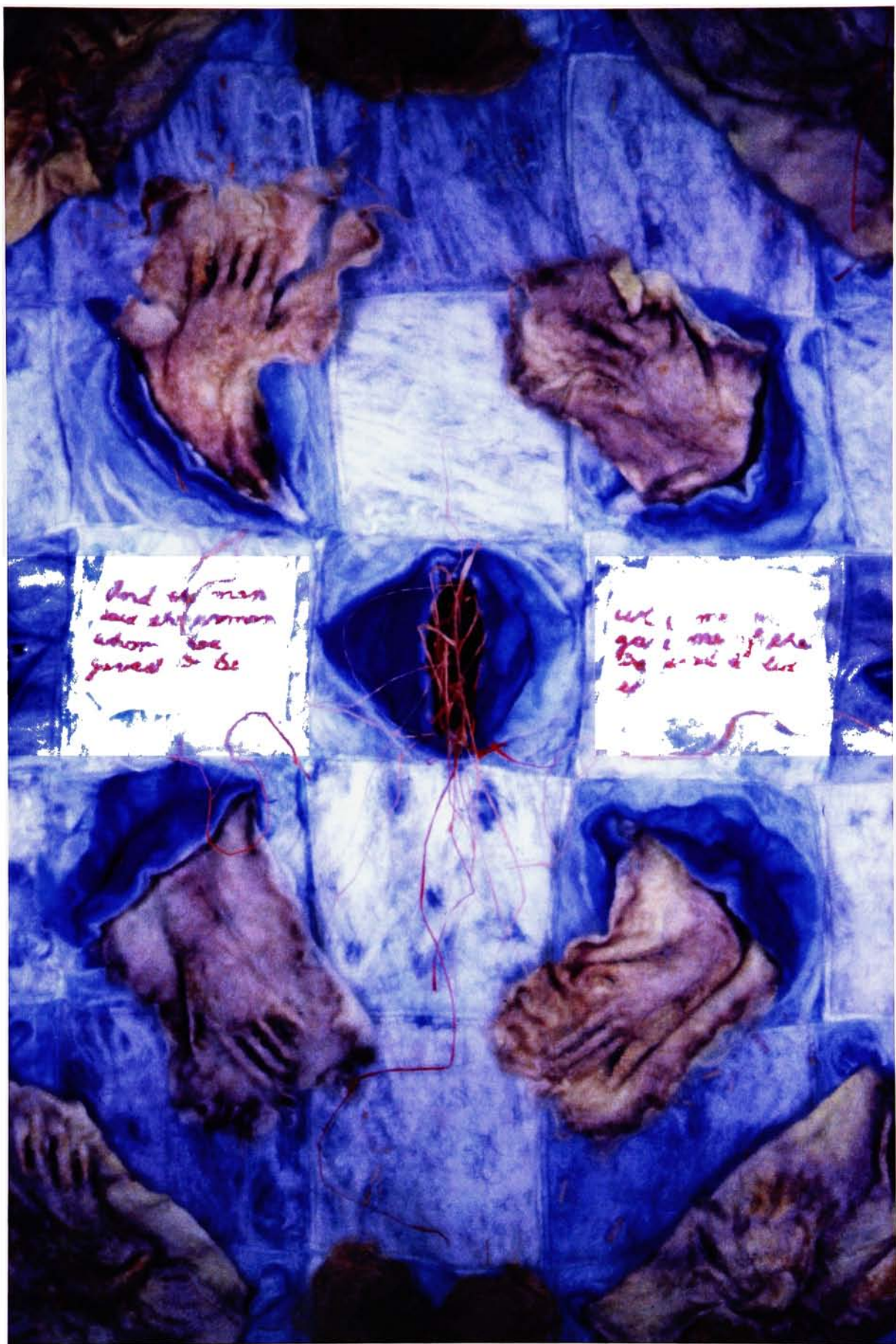


FIGURE 6

create conflicting feelings. The viewer is confronted with a conglomeration of material and media presented in a format often associated with nurturing, safety and security.

Moving Toward Reconciliation

Moving Toward Reconciliation [*See Illustrations 7 and 8*] is the result of wanting to continue experimenting with felt and, injecting some spontaneity back into my thesis work. This piece is a diptych composed of two rectangular panels which each have a hand extending from the side. The rectangular forms suggest two standing human figures. The panels are hung side by side such that the hands are facing and are tentatively reaching out to each other.

The felt used in this work is a thick bat of medium dark grey with yellow, gold and orange raffia strewn throughout. Most of the surface is thickly coated with Polyurethane and glistens a bit. The cast hands however, are not coated and therefore retain a soft texture.

This dense felt with the heavy coating represents those layers of defensive responses we develop to protect ourselves emotionally. These defensive responses and mechanisms cause us to become stilted and hesitant when approaching others. We are protected but at the same time entrapped within ourselves. That we continue to reach out, despite reservations and fear, reaffirms our humanness.

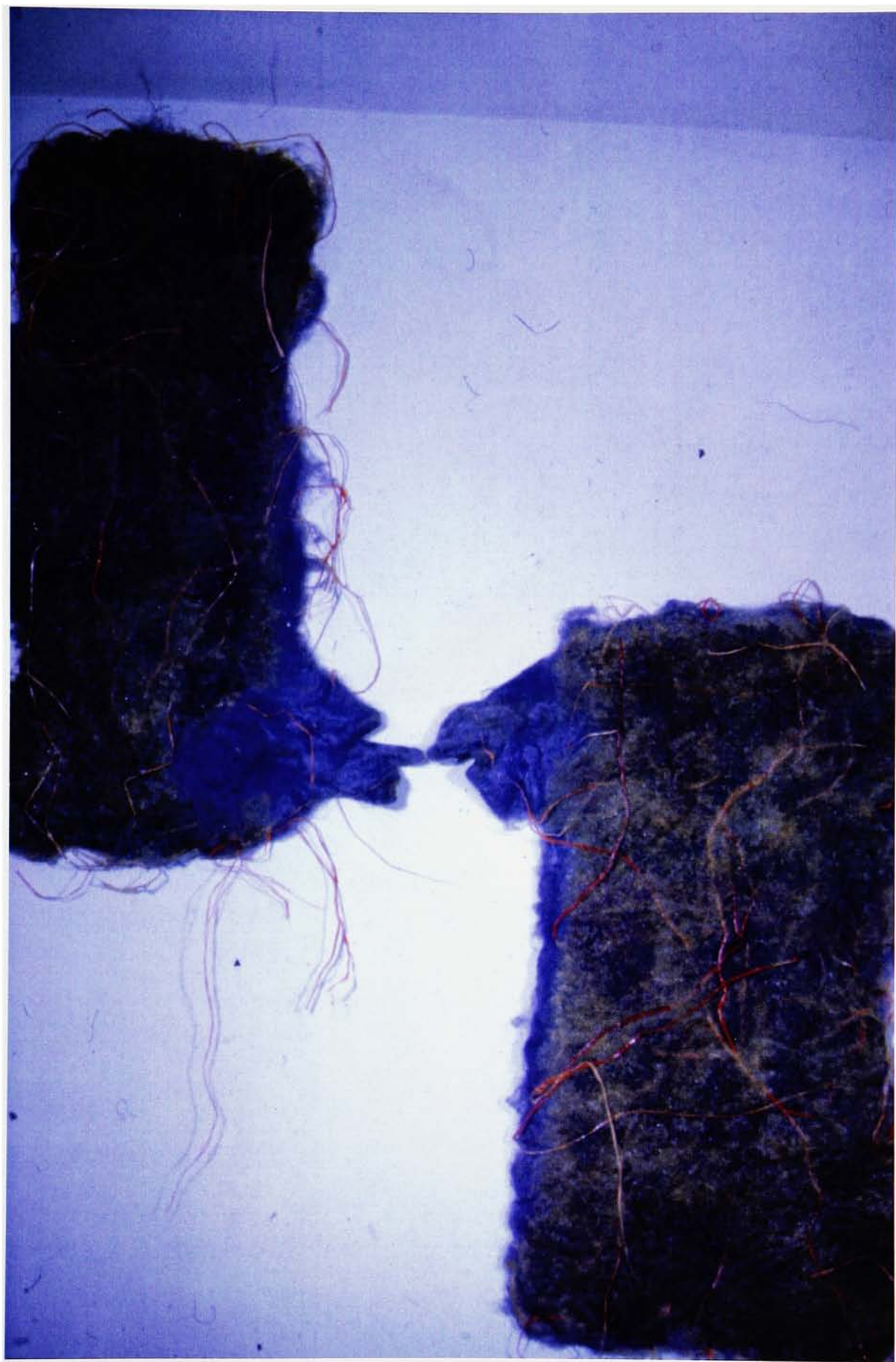


FIGURE 7

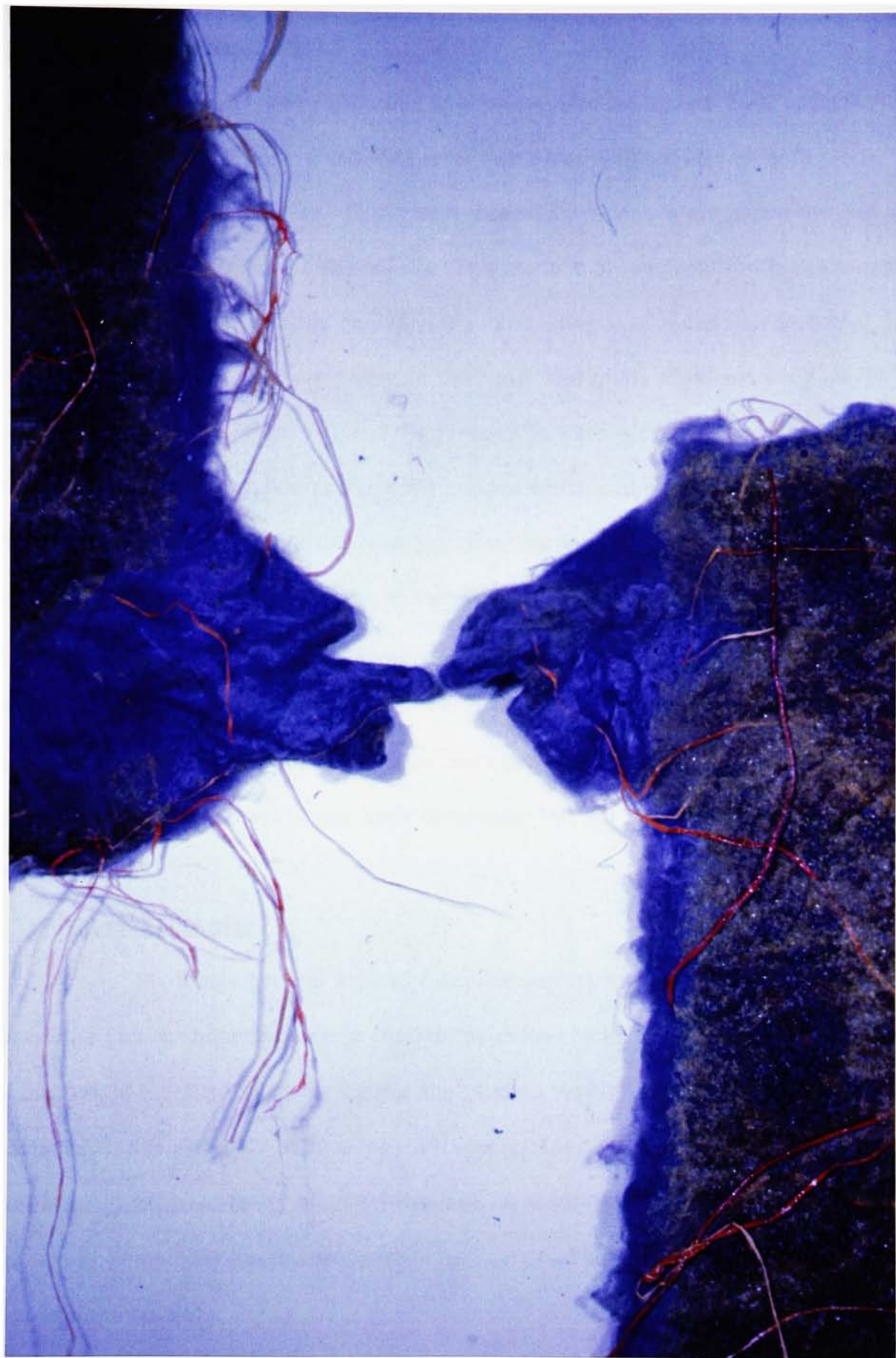


FIGURE 8

Continual Reconciliation

As I began working on this final piece, it became clear that reconciliation is approached step by step. Each step is its own reconciliation, as well as a step closer to a larger reconciliation. Once we successfully reconcile a major issue, we are almost compelled to resolve other issues. The process of reconciliation is continual.

As these thoughts played in my mind, images of reconciliation came flooding into my head. The resolution of "Us" and "Out of the Blue" were my steps towards reconciliation which enabled me to move forward with my work. "Moving toward Reconciliation" is one of the many images which came to mind. Another image that was particularly strong was that of a cast felt hand thrusting out of a resin-coated felt square and reaching out to the viewer. The square would reference the quilt and its conflict theme. The resin coating references our self-created shell. The reaching hand represents the effort it takes to break free from the fear and insecurity isolation fosters. Although the final piece does convey a sense of reconciliation, a second reconciliation piece would have communicated the "process" nature of reconciliation.

Closing Thoughts

My thesis body of work and experience are manifestations of the questions I have about deciding to change my career focus to the Arts. The attraction of the Arts is represented to me by the fiber and its sensuality. That I initially lost contact with this essential point is truly a metaphor for my life. In stepping back and reevaluating what led to my choice, I was able to reconnect with my aspirations, and goals and, remember the joy, excitement and sense of adventure which brought me to this point in my life.

V. *TECHNIQUE*

As previously stated, felting is a very basic process. For all the felt used in this thesis body of work the following procedure was employed:

1. The wool and mohair were dyed with Pro Acid Dyes following manufacturers instructions;
2. Because the wool became tangled after dyeing, it was carded. Carding or combing straightens the wool fiber and enables it to be more evenly blended. Carding also allows for more control in creating texture and density. This wool was carded twice;
3. The wool was then arranged on a sheet of fiberglass screening. Considerations regarding color arrangement, texture, density began at this point. Non-wool fibers and materials were well integrated with the wool fleece, because these materials do not felt but are actually entrapped within the wool via the felting process;
4. Once the wool was arranged, a second piece of screening was placed on top of the felt. The felt was thus sandwiched between screening. The screening was then hand sewn together around the border of the fiber. This secured the fiber arrangement within the screening. Because the felting process causes the fiber to move around within the screening, rows of large running stitches were sewn across the width and length of the felt. These stitches went through all thickness of this felt encasement (i.e. through bottom screening, fiber, top screening). These rows of stitching were between 5" - 7" apart;
5. This assemblage was ready to be felted. This consisted of first thoroughly dousing the encased fiber with cold water and liquid soap. The agitation process was begun. The fabric was pounded with a mallet (small pieces) or stomped on by foot (larger pieces). This was done for between 10-15 minutes making sure that the encased fiber was continually wet and lathered;

6. After this first agitation period was over, clear boiling hot water was poured over the fiber. Here again the fiber was thoroughly wetted and lathered. This felt was agitated in this hot soapy bath for approximately 5 minutes;
7. The felt was again doused with very cold water. The soap lather was maintained here also;
8. These alternating hot/cold baths were repeated 3 times for small pieces (i.e. quilt squares) and four times for large dense pieces (i.e. "Moving Toward Reconciliation");
9. After the final hot soapy bath, the felt bat was rinsed thoroughly in cold water to insure that all of the soap was removed;
10. The felting process was completed with the removal of the fiber from the screening;
11. For the quilt, the felt bats was dried before work proceeded.
12. For bats which were to be cast, the felt was left sopping wet.

Casting

Each cast felt was done over a period of days and involves coating the fiber several times with Polyurethane.

The molds were made by actually making casts from friends. Plaster bandages were wrapped around the hand, for example, and allowed to dry. Because the felts would be pounded into these cast forms, the plaster bandages were reinforced plaster of paris. This cast was finally coated with oil based Polyurethane to reduce the possibility of the felt sticking to the cast.

1. The felt was pounded into the mould with the intention of the causing the felt to take the mold's form. The felt was left to dry in the mould. Depending on the thickness of the felt the drying time would take up to twelve hours;

2. After the felt dried, the first coat of water based Polyurethane was applied lightly and also allowed to dry. At this point the felt was still pliable and the casting could be enhanced or corrected;
3. The second coat of Polyurethane was applied and allowed to dry;
4. After the second coat dried, the felt was removed from the cast;
5. Up to four coatings of Polyurethane were done;
6. Some of the hand forms were cast in two parts (inner and outer sides of the form); The two sides were then hand sewn together to create a three dimensional cast form.

The Polyurethane was applied on the inside or non-viewing side of the felt. This allowed me to control the effect the Polyurethane would have on the natural fiber texture.

Us

The felt bat for this piece was very light and airy. The plaster molds used to create the forms were placed in the approximate center of the piece. Three coats of Polyurethane produced a crusty surface to the cast forms, because the original felt was so thin. Once the coats of Polyurethane were dried, Velcro© was machine sewn to the uppermost edge of the work for mounting.

Out of the Blue

The quilt squares contained wool, mohair, sisal and raffia. I wanted to create some kind of pattern not only between the quilt squares and the contrasting cast forms, but also among the quilt squares themselves. Each color group of squares were felted individually because I wanted control over each square; adding or subtracting the amount of color I needed; make sure they were equally dense. After felting, the squares were trimmed to measure "11 x "11 because, I wanted each

square to have clean sharp edges. The squares which were to edge the top and bottom rows were left untrimmed in order to retain the natural undulating edge characteristic of handmade felt.

The squares were first sewn together on a standard sewing machine. Once all the squares (72) were together, I realized that the felt needed a backing because it could not support its own weight without stretching and sagging out of shape. The quilt was backed with a heavy duckcloth. The squares were top stitched, individually, around their edges to insure that the backing would be supporting the weight of each square individually. After each square was top stitched to the backing those squares which were slit (because they would have cast forms attached to them) were further reinforced to the backing. The corners of the openings were stay-stitched to prevent any tearing.

The limbs were ready to be placed on the quilt. Although I had originally intended to use three dimensional hand forms, many of them seemed to get "lost" on the quilt. Therefore only selected hand forms were three dimensional while others were left as relief forms. These forms were hand sewn into place.

The side edges of the quilt were whip stitched in order to create another type of undulating edge. Two rows of Velcro® were sewn to the top third of the quilt for mounting.

Reconciliation

This work started as two very thick, dark grey rectangular pieces of felt. Each piece had a small protrusion of felt extending from its side. These protrusions were cast in hand forms. The felt cast forms were coated with three layers of Polyurethane. The edges of the cast hands were hand sewn to further enhance their

forms. After the hand forms were finished, the viewing side of the work was covered with three coats of oil based Polyurethane. These coats were heavy and took longer to dry than I had anticipated. Strips of Velco© were glued to the back of this piece for mounting.

VI. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Currently, I am very interested in pushing the felt casting process further. I want to work on three dimensional castings. The three dimensional castings had obvious seams which detracted from the form.

I am also interested in combining felt with clear resins. I found that the oil based Polyurethanes created textures and surface which I like but because of the amber tint, they changed the color of the felts.

Conceptually, I can only think of working with the concept of humans on this earth and our frailties. Fiber just seems like a perfect medium to explore this issue. Topics related to gender roles are also appealing but do not hold as much interest as our collective humanness and how it is being transformed in this very technological world.

VII. CONCLUSION . . . AND RECONCILIATION

As stated previously, "Moving Toward Reconciliation" is not only the title of my thesis, but also the overriding theme of my thesis experience. Understanding the process of developing ideas and translating them into tangible objects was, in reality, my thesis body of work. Although I am generally pleased with the final pieces, they are secondary to the experience of seeing them take form. The experience of really connecting with the materials, learning to respect them, and trusting in basic instincts was fulfilling but also frightening. I began to understand that works of art do indeed have a life of their own. I realized that their life in some way reveals my own inner world. I began to understand what it means to create art and accept that this is my path in life. Getting through the fear of exposure was one of the essential lessons of this thesis experience for me.

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